

A Whole Language Project: Using Story Grammars in the EFL High School Classroom

By Dafne Gonzalez

Most EFL teachers know how difficult it is to get students to achieve fluency in English. This is mainly due to large classes, limited time, students sharing the same mother tongue, and inappropriate use of materials and/or methodology. In the last few years, EFL and ESL teachers have been exposed to the benefits of using Content-Based Instruction for a variety of reasons (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 1989); one being to give students the opportunity to use their previous knowledge to talk about academic topics.

In this sense, one of the subjects which has been more extensively used in language teaching is literature. Short (1990) distinguishes two approaches in the use of English literature for teaching. The humanistic approach, used by English Departments "tends to assume that students already have an ability to read, understand, and respond sensitively to literature." EFL college teachers emphasize linguistics and reading comprehension. As stated by Lazar (1993), literature "provides meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language." However, there is little work done with regard to the possible uses of literature for the K-12 EFL learners. There is some interesting material; but, it has been designed for ESL and LEP students (e.g. Enright and McCloskey 1988; Sasser 1992; Kessler, Lee, McCloskey, Quinn, and Stack 1994; Zaro and Salaberri 1995). EFL students at this level have not had the opportunity to become involved in the field of literary discourse. The few attempts to introduce pieces of narratives in EFL textbooks have failed to make use of discourse, or the structure of texts.

There is an unexplored world for the use of narrative folktales, legends, fables, fairy tales, and myths in the development of English as a foreign language. Stories are told to children all over the world. Most children recognize that a story is about to be told when they hear "Once there was..." or "Once upon a time..." In the same way, they know the story has come to an end when they hear "...and they lived happily ever after." Undoubtedly, students are unconsciously familiar with the discourse of stories.

In addition to this, research on the structure of the discourse of the narrative genre (Meyer 1975; Thorndyke 1977; Mandler and Johnson 1977; Carrell 1984) has shown that the mental representations of the elements of a story (story grammar) can help people remember the development of the story when retelling it.

We could assume that if memory is enhanced when people become aware of story grammar, students could also increase their fluency if trained in its use. In other words, if students could remember more elements of a story, they might retell the story with more details. Preliminary

results of research (Palencia 1997) on the effects of story grammars on EFL elementary students' oral fluency have shown a positive correlation.

With all this information in mind, we decided to explore the use of story grammars with high school students.

The Situation

In spite of the fact that our high school English curriculum requires a four-skill approach to language teaching, we know that developing communicatively competent speakers of English is an almost impossible goal to accomplish. In order to be more efficient, the English Department of our school decided to emphasize the reading and listening skills, limiting speaking and writing to survival level. The approach worked, but our students wanted to speak more. To meet the students' request, we incorporated Content-Based Instruction in our classes, with very good results. It increased verbal interaction to the point that 50 percent of the classroom talk was produced by the students (Gonzalez 1996). However, we felt that we could achieve more. That is when we decided to implement the use of narratives in our 7th grade classes, with an emphasis on discourse analysis, specifically the use of story grammar, in what we call the Whole Language Project. We chose the narrative genre because of its simple language, transmission of values, and entertainment value.

What is the Whole Language Project?

The Whole Language Project is a set of classroom activities which is a requirement for 7th graders in the last quarter of the school year. One of the four English periods a week is devoted to this project.

The project consists of the following activities:

- reading narratives
- filling in a story grammar map for each story read (Appendix A)
- retelling each story
- giving and receiving feedback
- writing summaries of each story read
- writing a big book in pairs
- presenting the big book to the whole class
- completing self-evaluations and reflection reports

Since we have a large number of students per class (33-36), we divide the class into two groups. While half the class reads, the other half speaks (retells stories). Students have the opportunity to select among a variety of narratives. During the reading time, students feel free to sit where they prefer. They are allowed to sit on the floor or even to go to the library or to the patio, which is something they cannot do in any other class.

After reading the selected story, students complete the story grammar map. Then, for homework, they write a summary of the story. In the following class, they retell their stories.

Students retell the story without using notes while peers and the teacher check the elements of the story grammar included by the student (see Appendix B), and give the corresponding feedback. This retelling can be done to the whole class, to a small group of students, or to a classmate. As a final task, at the end of the quarter, students, in self-selected pairs, have to write a story in the form of a big book and present it to the rest of the class. They will receive the corresponding feedback from teacher and peers. After completing all the requirements, students must fill in a self-evaluation and a reflection report about the whole project. Students and teachers (from other classes) vote for the best story and the winners receive a prize and a story writer certificate.

Students keep a portfolio which includes:

- story grammar maps of the stories read
- peer/teacher feedback checklists
- written summaries
- big book
- self-evaluation and reflection report

Since we are tied to an evaluation system, 30 percent of the total course grade was given to this project. The other 70 percent is distributed as follows: 30 percent end-of-quarter exam, 20 percent monthly quizzes, 10 percent cooperative group work, 10 percent participation.

Our evaluation system has a range from 0 to 20, so the highest grade possible for the project is 20 points which are distributed in the following way (See Figure 1).

Students must complete at least 6 readings with the corresponding tasks to be able to accumulate 12 points. The other 8 points correspond to the big book assignment and the self-evaluation. These grades are kept in the portfolio checklist (see Appendix C).

Learning About Story Grammars

The first step towards the implementation of this project was to make the teachers aware of the benefits of using narratives and story grammars in their classes. In order to do this, a teacher training workshop was prepared (Gonzalez 1996). Teachers learned about story grammars, used them, retold stories, and analyzed and reflected on the use of story grammars in different levels. Once this was accomplished, a lesson plan was prepared to introduce the project to 7th grade students (See Figure 2).

Conclusion

After reading and discussing the lesson plan, the teachers involved in the project were very enthusiastic and eager to start. Once the introductory class was given, the teachers got together, discussed, and evaluated their classes. In general, students understood the purpose of using story grammars and enjoyed the whole class. Most students brought their self-decorated portfolios for the next class, although it was not assigned for that day. At the moment, the Whole Language Project is in progress and teachers as well as students are enjoying it.

Before implementing this project, students were given a questionnaire measuring their attitude towards reading, and specifically story reading. Ninety-five percent of the students said they like to read stories because "they are fun," "they teach about different places." This meant we were one step ahead since we did not have to deal with reluctant students.

What are our students getting from this project? They are learning about other cultures, and other places, for example, the stories used for the introductory class were from China, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, and India. Students are discussing different values. They are learning to listen to others. They are being trained in self- and peer-evaluation. They are learning to be responsible for the organization of their own learning. They are practicing the four skills of the language. They are working with the four elements of communicative competence: linguistic, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies (Canale and Swain 1980); and last, but by no means least, students are having fun, which lowers their affective filter (Krashen 1985), making them more "affectively" open to the language.

Obtaining the material might seem a difficult task, but it is not. Many EFL graded readers and textbooks have versions of fables, legends, folktales, and myths which most teachers rarely use. There are also different books and posters about this genre in the market (Walker 1990; Young 1992; Zaro and Salaberri 1995; Scieska 1995; Stern 1996).

The story grammar map used for our project was adapted from a variety of grammar models proposed by different authors (Labov 1972; Thorndyke 1977; Mandler and Johnson 1977; Mandler 1978; Hatch 1992; Kessler et. al. 1994). This model was created because it was considered to be easier for students.

With this project, we have learned that this kind of narrative remains as valid a didactic resource to teach and reinforce individual and social values as it was for our ancestors.

Dafne Gonzalez is Assistant Professor of EST reading at Universidad Simon Bolivar, Caracas, Venezuela. She is involved in academic supervision and teacher education of EFL elementary and high school practitioners.

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